

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
11 JUNE 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Thursday, 11 June 2015

PRESENT: Councillor Clive Carver (Chair)

Councillors: Marion Bateman, Peter Curtis, Andy Dunbobbin, Robin Guest, Ron Hampson, Richard Jones, Richard Lloyd, Vicky Perfect, David Roney, Nigel Steele-Mortimer, Carolyn Thomas and Arnold Woolley

SUBSTITUTION:

Councillor: Mike Lowe for Ian Smith

APOLOGY:

Councillor: Brian Lloyd.

CONTRIBUTORS:

Leader of the Council & Cabinet Member for Finance, Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise), Corporate Finance Manager, Customer Services Manager and Performance Team Leader

IN ATTENDANCE:

Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

9. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 14 May 2015 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Prior to the introduction of the Improvement Plan 2015/16 report, the Leader of the Council & Cabinet Member for Finance and the Chief Executive congratulated Councillor Clive Carver on his appointment as Chair of the Committee.

10. IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2015/16

The Leader of the Council & Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report and explained that adoption and publication of an Improvement Plan was a statutory requirement under the 2009 Local Government Measure.

The Plan would allow the Council to concentrate on areas that needed attention and the current priorities and sub-priorities of the Plan had been

reviewed and some areas that had been completed in 2014/15 had been removed from the 2015/16 Plan. The key priorities had been broadened and the specific reference to the Deeside area had been removed from the sub-priority in relation to business sector growth so this now covered the whole of the County. The Leader commented on the Deeside Enterprise Zone and referred to the Vibrant and Viable Places programme. Flintshire Business Week had recently been launched and the Leader spoke of the small and medium sized businesses that were engaging and taking part in the initiative. The continuation of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard work would provide significant opportunities for the Council to engage with the Housing Business Sector. A Member workshop had been held on 29 May 2015 where the working draft documents had been considered along with the proposed targets and classifications for the statutory national performance indicators. The Plan was to be considered at a Special Cabinet meeting on 23 June 2015 followed by a County Council meeting in the afternoon.

The Chief Executive detailed the three documents in the report and explained that appendix 3 was a summary of the key issues from and responses to the consultations with Members at the workshop held on 29 May 2015. In highlighting the budget, he said that it was important to look at future years revenue funding and capital programme alongside the priorities set out in the plan. The Plan could be changed during the year.

In referring to appendix 3, the Performance Team Leader explained that the document included responses provided at the workshop or subsequently following the workshop. General issues were reported first followed by issues raised on individual areas or sub-priorities and then on specific performance measures. The Performance Team Leader advised that all of the amendments that had been requested at the workshop had been highlighted in blue in the Improvement Plan 2015/16 document.

The Chair commented on the issue of broadband speeds and referred in particular to the fiberoptic link that had been laid by Welsh Government in 2010 near to Hawarden Business Park. In response, the Chief Executive spoke of meetings with British Telecom (BT) and the Deeside Enterprise Zone Board about issues including 'notspots' and added that improvements had been made to broadband infrastructures at Hawarden Business Park as a result. He advised that he would obtain an update on the concerns raised particularly about 'notspots' and suggested that BT be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Richard Jones referred to the section on Economy and Enterprise and indicated that he had stated at the workshop that the priority in the original document concentrated on the area of Deeside and Deeside Enterprise Zone in particular. These references had been amended but the document was not highlighted in blue as had been advised by the Performance Team Leader. He also referred to the wording on the first bullet point under 'Risks to manage' and queried why the wording had been changed. The Performance Team Leader advised that this had been changed following discussions with the Enterprise Manager and she provided details of the other minor changes that had been made following the workshop. Councillor Jones felt that references to Deeside and the Deeside Enterprise Zone were still included throughout the

document and therefore disagreed with the opening remarks of the Leader that all references had been removed. In response, the Leader concurred that the local economy growth should benefit the whole of the county and not specifically Deeside and the Deeside Enterprise Zone. The Chief Executive reiterated earlier comments about the broadband infrastructure for Hawarden and the Deeside Enterprise Zone, which was a prime business location of national significance.

On the Improvement Plan, Councillor Jones referred to the importance of the document and of the development of the Medium Term Financial Plan alongside it. He felt that if one location was referenced then any revenue would also be restricted to that area.

Councillor Jones raised a general concern at some of the sub-priorities that had either been changed or removed since the 2014/15 Plan. It was confirmed that in most instances this was because they were now business as usual.

Councillor Jones highlighted the sub-priority of Appropriate and Affordable Homes and in particular the achievement measure on the number of households where the Council had discharged its full statutory duty into private rented accommodation. In response, the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) spoke of the new Housing Act for Wales which had come into effect in April 2015 and explained that the Council could now discharge the duty for homeless households to the private rental sector. Work was ongoing with private landlords and an Environment Health Officer would ensure that the properties in the private rental sector were at the appropriate level. She explained that the measure was new and therefore did not have any current target but added that a baseline would be established for 2015/16 to allow a target to be set for 2016/17.

On the issue of homelessness Councillor Jones queried how the target of 90% for 2015/16 would be achieved for measure HHA/013 (homeless prevention) when it had not been met in preceding years. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) commented that there was now a requirement to work with those who were threatened with homelessness within 56 days rather than 28 days which was the previous requirement. Officers were being more proactive and it was therefore anticipated that more potential homelessness could be prevented and that the target was realistic and could be achieved. Flintshire had been awarded some transition funding from Welsh Government to support the implementation of the new legislation which made the prevention of homelessness a statutory duty.

On the measure on Disabled Facilities Grants, Councillor Jones suggested that an explanation should be included about the issue of resources.

In response to a query from the Chair, Councillor Jones explained that a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) would be a replacement for Section 106 Agreements on planning applications. He also raised a concern that the CIL was being challenged by developers and may not provide any benefit but may also limit funding available for any one project.

The Leader of the Council hoped it was recognised that Deeside was one of only six areas that was part of the 'Vibrant and Viable Places' project and the delivery of the programme was at a critical stage. He felt that it was relevant to

include this as a sub-priority to ensure that the scheme was on track as it would be scrutinised carefully by Welsh Government.

Councillor Jones also highlighted the Flint regeneration programme and in referring to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), said that it was important that rural areas were not forgotten and were protected. He felt that it was unfair that Deeside and Flint were so heavily mentioned in the plan. The Chief Executive understood the concerns raised by Councillor Jones but reminded Members that the Council had formally adopted the plans for the Deeside and Flint regeneration areas. The majority of funding was being provided from national sources and other partners and could not be used elsewhere. National support was area specific based on business potential and indices of deprivation. The Leader added that regeneration of Flint had been a commitment from the previous Administration.

Councillor Arnold Woolley indicated that the criteria to receive the funding had been set by Welsh Government and added that it was difficult to obtain funding for areas that did not qualify. He reminded Members that £5m had been received for rural development and £10m for improvements to the Deeside strip.

On the issue of the road infrastructure, Councillor Jones referred to page 63 and the target for the percentage of roads that were in overall poor condition. He queried why the target figures were increasing and whether this meant that the same condition could not be maintained. The Chief Executive advised that it was impossible to keep the roads in the same condition as the amount of resources available for road maintenance had been reduced. He said that it was appropriate that the priority was included in the plan and spoke of the importance of utilising the funding well in line with the Highways Asset Management Plan (HAMP). Councillor Jones felt that only targets that were aspiring to improve should be included in the plan and questioned whether the measure should be removed. The Performance Team Leader suggested that a sentence be included reflecting that whilst the targets had reduced due to funding reductions these were still ambitious targets.

The Chief Executive advised that if officers present at this meeting could not fully answer the questions asked by Members, then a response would be provided in writing following the meeting. It was agreed that Councillor Jones would forward any additional questions on to the Chief Executive and the Performance Team Leader.

Councillor Carolyn Thomas welcomed the inclusion of tourism in the Improvement Plan and she highlighted rural areas and the provision of funding through the Rural Development Plan. She raised concern that rural areas were being forgotten and suggested that the priority should be stronger and should include the identification of alternative funding streams. Councillor Thomas and Councillor Marion Bateman welcomed the earlier suggestion for BT to attend a future meeting of the Committee. The Leader also indicated that WG officials had been made aware of the issues raised to do with broadband and suggested that they also be invited to attend the meeting. The Chief Executive felt that it would be appropriate to hold an all Member workshop rather than a formal meeting and this was welcomed.

Councillor Marion Bateman concurred with the comments of Councillor Woolley and said that she felt that the rest of the county would benefit from the funding received for the areas of Flint and Deeside. In referring to page 15, she queried whether the development of extra care provision in Holywell would still be included in the Improvement Plan as the application for planning permission had been refused at a recent meeting of the Planning and Development Control Committee. The Chief Executive confirmed that extra care was still a priority but reminded Members that national grant funding for the scheme was no longer available. However, he added that Flint extra care scheme had been self-funded which should be welcomed as there were very few examples of self-funding such schemes in Wales.

Councillor Andy Dunbobbin requested that the Council's commitment to the Armed Forces Community Covenant should be specifically mentioned in the plan. Councillor Peter Curtis commented on the extra care scheme in Holywell and also on the issue of tourism in the area being a significant feature in the future. He spoke of the emphasis on the development of the Deeside area and felt that the funding being put into the Deeside Enterprise Zone would benefit the whole of the county.

In response to a query from Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer, the Chief Executive suggested that older drivers would be those over the age of 75, as defined by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and that he was not aware of the criteria for taking part in the driving assessment.

On the issue of Deeside, Councillor Robin Guest agreed with the comments made, but because of the close location of the Deeside Enterprise Zone to the Wirral and Chester, he disagreed that there would be an economic benefit to the whole of Flintshire. He felt that this could mean that some rural areas would struggle to survive and commented that even though Mold was currently a thriving town, it could not be guaranteed that this would continue. He also felt that it could not be assumed that all successful businesses that were located in areas such as Holywell, Buckley and Saltney would continue to survive because the Deeside regeneration was successful.

The Chair referred to the costs of occupied office accommodation and queried whether the Council would benefit from reduced business rates if some offices were unoccupied. The Chief Executive confirmed that the Authority would not qualify for reduced rates and added that all accommodation was being reviewed to support more agile working and to encourage open plan office areas as these were more cost effective. Once part or all of a building was vacated, non-domestic rates would still need to be paid by the authority. In response to a query from the Chair about whether the Council would discuss a reduction in business rates for County Hall and the Unilever building in Ewloe, the Chief Executive advised that the issue would be raised with the Rateable Value Agency. The Leader of the Council advised that the Council's assets fell in the remit of the Organisational Change Overview & Scrutiny Committee and added that this was an issue that could be explored by that Committee.

Councillor Richard Lloyd welcomed the 0% commercial vacancy rate in Saltney and sought assurance that investment in Saltney would continue. The

Chief Executive commented on the work that had been undertaken for a pharmacy within the Morrison's store in Saltney.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Improvement Plan be received with the following observations:-
 - (i) that the rural areas of the County should receive more of an emphasis
 - (ii) that the Council's commitment to the Armed Forces Community Covenant should be specifically mentioned
- (b) That due to the importance of the superfast broadband roll out to the development of the local economy, that BT and Welsh Government representatives be invited to give a presentation at an all Member workshop to be held for that purpose.
- (c) That further information and interpretation on the changes made to the Improvement Plan be provided to Members to allow further responses before final approval by Cabinet and Council on 23 June 2015.

11. YEAR END IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORTS

The Chief Executive introduced a report to consider elements of the 2014/15 Year End Improvement Plan Monitoring Report relevant to the Committee.

The reports highlighted a number of areas where the measure was not achieved and the Chief Executive explained that these areas were still included in the new plan for 2015/16 to enable the Committee to continue monitoring them.

Councillor Robin Guest queried whether comparisons were made with other local Authorities on areas such as customer feedback about visits to the Council's website. In referring to the figures, he felt that they were disappointing and asked whether benchmarking with other authorities was undertaken. The Chief Executive explained that digital access such as the website was assessed by the Society of IT Management (SOCITM) and Flintshire County Council had progressed in the last year on the issue of wider customer access. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) said that more work was required on the website about self-serve and navigation and details of benchmarking indicators would also be submitted to the Committee. On the issue of functionality and design, the Chief Officer (Governance) advised that SOCITM had awarded two out of four stars to the Council and added that many other authorities had only been awarded one star. However, on content SOCITM had advised that there was a need for improvement; this work was being undertaken.

Councillor Richard Jones felt that more could have been done on developing a longer term financial plan and that the progress was disappointing. He also asked why the measure was not included in the Improvement Plan for 2015/16. He queried how long term planning could be achieved when there was such uncertainty about the level of revenue support grant to be received from Welsh Government in 2015/16 and beyond. In response, the Chief Executive

confirmed that the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) was in the 2015/16 Improvement Plan and confirmed that a report was to be considered at Cabinet on 16 June 2015 and would be submitted to the meeting of this Committee scheduled for 9 July 2015. He added that there was uncertainty about funding levels but explained that budgets would be based on historic patterns of the amount of revenue support grant received. The Leader of the Council & Cabinet Member for Finance confirmed that further discussions would be undertaken on the MTFS and added that every opportunity had been taken to raise the concerns about lack of predictions from WG about levels of funding. However, he added that there were many areas of pressure that a level of certainty could be given on. In referring to the £527m of funding allocated to Health Services, Councillor Richard Jones said that it was important to ensure that monies were allocated appropriately. The Leader of the Council & Cabinet Member for Finance referred to the budget that was to take place on 8 July 2015 and advised that it was anticipated that there would be more reductions in funding for local authorities over the coming months.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee's comments be commended to the Policy & Performance Team.

12. YEAR END CHIEF OFFICER PERFORMANCE REPORTS

The Chief Executive introduced a report to consider the 2014/15 Year End Service Performance Reports produced at Chief Officer level for their respective portfolios.

He explained that the report contained historic data and areas of concern had been highlighted.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee acknowledges that the areas of poor performance had been highlighted within the reports; and
- (b) That the Committee's comments be commended to the Policy & Performance Team.

13. CUSTOMER SERVICES AND CALL HANDLING UPDATE

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) introduced a report to update Members on the progress made towards the changes to the way telephone calls were received via 01352 752121 (Switchboard).

She detailed the background to the report and explained that Contact Centre telephony software had been introduced to the main switchboard on 22 April 2015. The current switchboard service would cease on 31 August 2015. The Chief Officer suggested an amended recommendation which would be to seek Member assurance about the proposals. It was reported that approximately 10% of calls to Switchboard were internal and it was the intention to make it easier for staff to be able to identify the number they required themselves.

Reassurance was provided that the Switchboard service would not end from September 2015 as callers who had chosen option 4 and were currently directed to the Switchboard, would instead be directed to the existing contact centres in Streetscene, Housing and Revenues & Benefits. An option would also be included for callers to input the extension number of the person they wanted to contact if they knew it. The Chief Officer also advised that the Reception Area would not be closing and that work was ongoing to establish whether some or all of the current reception areas could be consolidated.

Councillor Ron Hampson referred to the excellent service provided by the Switchboard Team. He raised concern that option 4 would no longer be available and was assured by the Chief Officer that these calls would be directed to the existing call centres rather than to the Switchboard. On the issue of agile working, Councillor Marion Bateman queried whether it was possible for Members to be provided with a list of mobile telephone numbers for officers. The Chief Executive indicated that officers who had a Council owned mobile telephone should be including all methods of contact on their correspondence, such as emails. Councillor Bateman also expressed her disappointment that answerphones were not being used and that phones sometimes were left to ring out. The Chief Officer advised that work was underway to roll out advice to all staff about the use of voicemail/mobiles. She added that it was important that all telephones were answered in front facing teams and asked that Members let her know of any problems that they experienced with phones not being answered.

Councillor Richard Jones concurred that it would be useful for Members to have a list of contact numbers including mobile phone details and asked why all services could not be covered by the Contact Centres. In response, the Chief Officer said that not all services had a contact centre but considerations were being given to whether the Council should have a single Contact Centre. She felt that it was not acceptable for phones to go unanswered or for work mobile number details to not be provided. The Customer Services Manager advised that a phone directory was available on the Infonet and that work was ongoing to address the issue of mobile numbers being made available to Members.

Councillor Robin Guest spoke about extension numbers and felt that it was important to advise those who phoned that the extension number that they needed to input was four digits. The Chief Officer indicated that there was a need to ensure that the technology could deal with this. The Customer Services Manager responded to a query from the Chair about the switchboard phone number being different to the direct dial numbers for individual extensions. Councillor Peter Curtis spoke of his frustration that his calls were sometimes not returned when he had left a message for officers to call him.

In response to the comments made, the Chief Executive advised that an update report on Call Handling would be provided to a future meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Arnold Woolley suggested that an exercise be undertaken to ensure that all information produced by the Council contained the correct contact information.

The Chair reiterated the excellent service provided by the Switchboard and raised concern that once calls were directed to the existing Contact Centres, the officers who answered would not have the local knowledge that the current Switchboard Team had.

Following the discussion, the Chief Officer said that a training programme was to be rolled out for all call handling staff and as the organisation was reducing in size, it was important that users phoning the authority knew the correct numbers to call. She reiterated the earlier suggestion that an update report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

The Chair queried why the introduction of the enhanced service to allow customers to input the extension number if they know it was only being introduced from 1 September 2015; he asked if this could be finalised sooner. The Chief Officer confirmed that an earlier introduction could be considered.

In response to a query from Councillor Hampson about savings from the implementation of the proposals, the Chief Officer advised that the savings for 2015/16 were £100,000 with a further £64,000 in 2016/17.

Councillor Andy Dunbobbin commented on a booklet which the Council had produced which had contained incorrect contact details and said that following him contacting the relevant department, the information had been changed. He raised concern that Members were only raising such issues at this meeting if they had been aware of them previously.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee has received some assurance with regard to the development of the call handling arrangements;
- (b) That the officers be asked to monitor the performance risks/concerns expressed at the meeting;
- (c) That it be recommended that the proposed enhancement to the automated service (immediate dial now for extension numbers) be introduced as soon as possible; and
- (d) That an update report be submitted to the Committee in due course.

14. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2014/15 (MONTH 12)

The Corporate Finance Manager introduced a report to provide Members with the Revenue Budget Monitoring 2014/15 (Month 12) information for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which was being submitted to Cabinet on 16 June 2015.

For the Council Fund, the projected net in-year expenditure was reported to be £2.059m lower than the budget and the movements from Month 10 were summarised in appendix 1. The changes from Month 10 related mainly to adjustments for the single status rebalancing exercise, property maintenance reallocations and workforce efficiency accounting adjustments. The overall

variance between Month 10 and Month 12 was £0.343m and included an increase in workforce efficiencies with a positive variance of £0.546m; the details were shown in paragraph 3.12. The second main change was the final estimated cost for the closure plan for the orphaned site at Sandycroft and the Council's liability for the closure of the risk was £0.800m. The analysis of Corporate and Functional efficiencies currently projected that £7.682m (87%) would be achieved resulting in a net underachievement of £1.158m. Section 4 and appendix 6 detailed the carry forward requests which were all recommended for approval. Included within the 2014/15 budget were provisions for non-standard inflation and allocations for this had been made to departments where there had been an evidenced need and had resulted in an underspend of £0.240m. The Corporate Finance Manager advised that there was a reduced risk of significant changes occurring so previously reported risks had now been removed. However, the final outturn would not be confirmed until the accounts had been finalised and submitted for audit. Section 7 and appendix 4 provided details of the unearmarked reserves and indicated that the current projected level of the contingency reserve at 31 March 2015 was £5.000m.

The HRA was projected to have an overall overspend of £0.069m and a projected closing balance at month 12 of £1.096m, which at 3.65% of total expenditure satisfied the prudent approach of ensuring a minimum level of 3%.

Councillor Robin Guest felt that it had been regrettable that reductions in service provision had been undertaken when they may not have been required due to the amount of reserves available. In response the Leader & Cabinet Member for Finance said that he had asked for further work on efficiencies for future years. He commented on the importance of utilising the budget to benefit the Council due to reductions in funding that the Authority would face in the future. One-off efficiencies could not support recurring efficiencies and the 2015-16 budget had been set on the basis of the recurring funds available to the Council. The Corporate Finance Manager indicated that the reserves had accumulated over a number of years and the 2015/16 budget had been agreed based on the issues arising at that time which was at Month 7. The Chief Executive explained that the contingency reserves were for in-year issues that could not be predicted. The Council was in a positive position, which was not the case for a number of other Councils which had a negative figure. He added that a reserve of £5m was a modest amount when compared to the overall annual budget of the Council.

In response to a question from the Chair about whether the Italian owners of the former Euticals site in Sandycroft would be pursued to recover any of the costs incurred by the Council, the Chief Executive confirmed that all attempts would be made to recover the costs but he did not know if this would be successful. He provided an explanation on the responsibility of the Council to make the abandoned site safe. Councillor Guest indicated that the grant funding from Welsh Government of £0.700m and the £0.800m liability for the Council resulted in a £0.200m shortfall which he queried. The Corporate Finance Manager advised that this figure had been included as costs in 2013/14.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Revenue Budget Monitoring Report (Month 12) be noted; and

(b) That no recommendations be made to the Cabinet on this occasion.

15. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Member Engagement Manager introduced the report to consider the Forward Work Programme for the Committee.

He advised that a Member workshop on the Medium Term Finance Plan was to be held on 7 July 2015. Following a discussion, it was agreed that the workshop would commence at 9.30am. The items that were to be considered at the meetings scheduled for 9 July 2015 and 10 September 2015 were detailed.

During earlier discussions, it had been suggested that a Customer Services Update Report would be submitted to a future meeting in due course. An invitation to the Police & Crime Commissioner to attend a meeting to discuss the Crime and Policing Plan 2016/17 had also been extended but a response had not yet been received.

Councillor Andy Dunbobbin asked whether a joint meeting with the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny from Wrexham County Borough Council had been scheduled. The Member Engagement Manager indicated that this was still being pursued.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme, as submitted, be approved; and
- (b) That the Member Engagement Manager, in consultation with the Chair, Vice-Chair and officers, be authorised to vary the work programme between meetings.

16. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the public or press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.25 pm)

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Chair